



EPA wrong choice to lead \$6 billion cleanup of Great Lakes, say experts

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WASHINGTON -- A regional commission would better direct a proposed \$6 billion Great Lakes cleanup program than would the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, experts say.

Environmentalists and government officials told the U.S. Senate Government Operations subcommittee Wednesday that the EPA's Great Lakes National Program Office, which oversees many lakes programs now, has neither the money nor the muscle to lead a major cleanup program.

"While Congress envisioned the (GLNPO) to be the key agency responsible for managing and coordinating restoration programs, the reality is they don't have the power, the budget or the reach to really direct programs over multiple federal agencies and multiple levels of government," said Dennis Schornack, U.S. chairman of the International Joint Commission. The commission is a U.S.-Canadian organization that manages water issues between the countries.

Schornack believes the EPA, if given the authority, mandate and money by Congress, would be capable of leading the effort to improve the health of the Great Lakes through a coordinated cleanup and investment program.

But not everyone agrees with Schornack. Local officials feel that decision-making authority for protecting the Great Lakes and determining where money should be spent is best kept on the state level.

"We believe it is the role of the region's governors to establish policy priorities, in consultation with local governments and other stakeholders, and to plan specific activities to achieve those priorities," said Christopher Jones, director of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency and a spokesman for the Council of Great Lakes Governors.

"We, too, believe that we would like to make sure the governors have a very strong role in the process," said Elizabeth Boyd, Gov. Jennifer Granholm's press secretary.

Legislation sponsored by Democratic Sen. Carl Levin, Michigan's senior senator, would create an appointed advisory board of local, state, tribal and federal leaders rather than the EPA to develop priorities and determine funding levels for the \$6 billion federal spending program.

Levin's bill, pending in the Senate, appeals to local officials who feel decision-making authority for protecting the Great Lakes and determining spending is best kept on the state level.

Wednesday's hearing was prompted, in part, by a Government Accounting Office report this month charging that

the lakes were in bad shape even after \$3.6 billion was spent on cleanup over the last 10 years.

"The lakes are still threatened and, in some cases, are getting worse," said John Stephenson, director of natural resources and the environment for the GAO.

Stephenson told the subcommittee that he felt the EPA had authority under current law manage any cleanup efforts and should be required to coordinate future Great Lakes protection strategies.

Thomas Skinner, the EPA's national program manager for the Great Lakes, said he welcomed the challenge to oversee the ambitious proposals pending in Congress.

"We're glad to take on that mantle of responsibility, but to have that responsibility we also need to have more authority," Skinner said.

Environmentalists believe the broad-based panel featuring many voices, including representatives of the public, would be the most effective way to handle Great Lakes protection programs.

"We need an independent body, one not controlled by any one agency, which defines goals, targets and timelines," said Margaret Wooster, a spokeswoman for Great Lakes United, a consortium of environmental groups. "This body should be led by the region's representatives -- federal, state, local and tribal -- with strong citizen involvement."

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